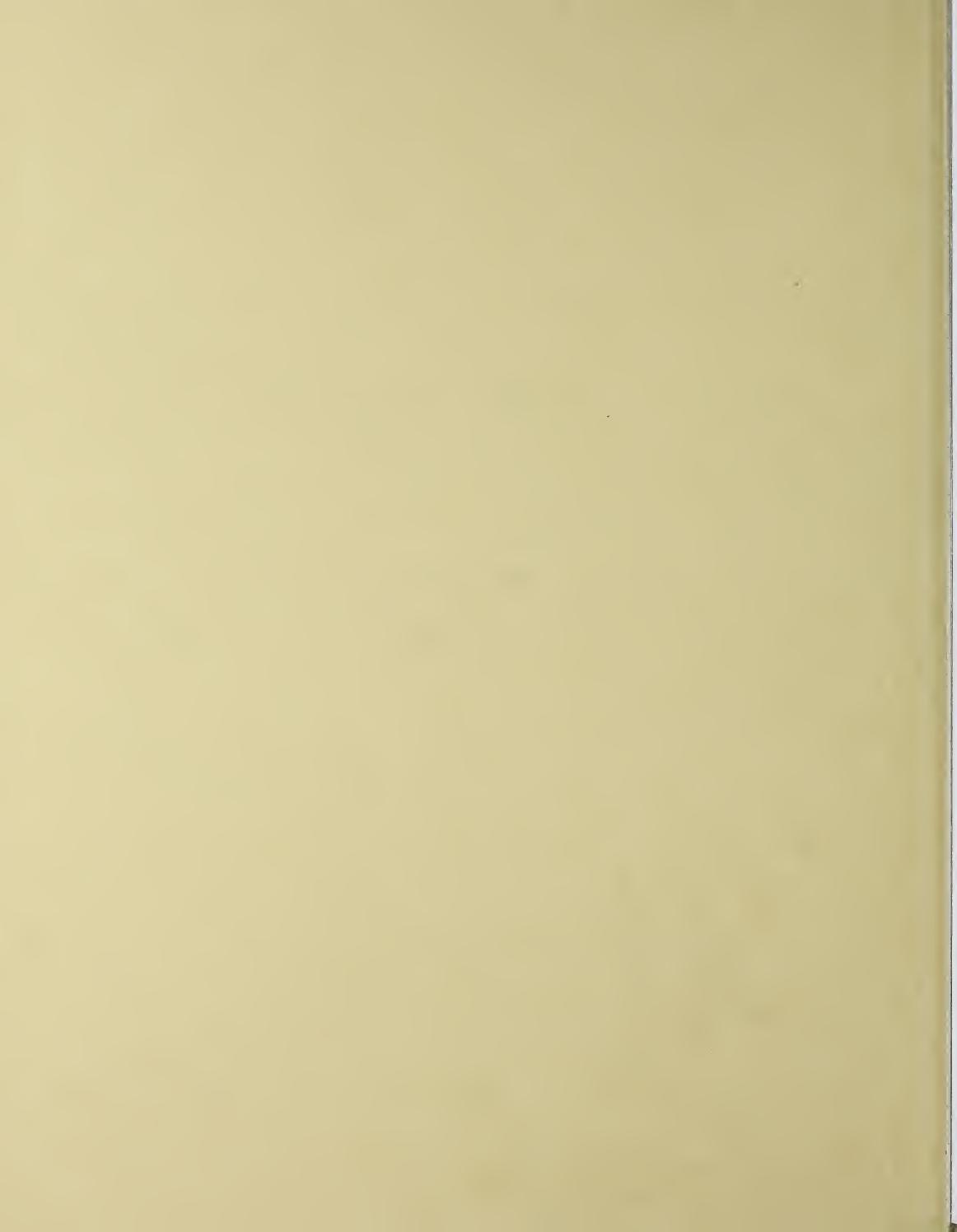


Lincoln's Mystery Story
1846

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Abraham Lincoln before 1860

Lincoln's Mystery Story, 1846

Excerpts from newspapers and other
sources

From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

A Mystery Story by Abraham Lincoln

Abraham Lincoln is famous for many things that he said and wrote, but did you know that he once wrote a mystery story? One of those true-detective-mystery story type that appear in magazines today?

Such story, in fact, was written by young Lawyer Lincoln, long before he became the great President, and it has been discovered in the musty old files of the Quincy, Ill., Whig of April 15, 1846.

(In Illinois "Quincy" is pronounced "Quinsky.")

As Lincoln tells the story, four men went out for a walk one Spring day—and only three came back. It looked like murder all right and everything was set for a hanging when the victim turned up alive!

"It may well be doubted whether a stranger affair ever occurred," wrote Mr. Lincoln. He ought to have known; he was defense lawyer for the accused man.

This story was discovered in the Quincy paper by Roger W. Barrett of a Chicago family long interested in everything about Lincoln and was reprinted in the current Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine.

THE TRAILOR MURDER MYSTERY By Abraham Lincoln

IN THE year 1841, there resided, at different points in the state of Illinois, three brothers by the name of Trailor. Their Christian names were William, Henry and Archibald.

Archibald resided at Springfield, then as now the seat of government of the state. He was a sober, retiring, and industrious man, of about 30 years of age; a carpenter by trade, and a bachelor, boarding with his partner in business—a Mr. Myers. Henry, a year or two older, was a man of like retiring habits; had a family, and resided with it on a farm, at Clary's Grove, about 20 miles distant from Springfield in a northwesterly direction. William, still older, and with similar habits, resided on a farm in Warren County, distant from Springfield something more than 100 miles in the same northwesterly direction. He was a widower with several children.

In the neighborhood of William's residence, there was, and had been for several years, a man by the name of Fisher, who was somewhat above the age of 50; had no family, and no settled home; but who boarded and lodged a while here and a while there, with persons for whom he did little jobs of work. His habits were remarkably economical, so that an impression got about that he had accumulated a considerable amount of money.

In the latter part of May, in the year mentioned, William formed the purpose of visiting his brothers at Clary's Grove and Springfield; and Fisher, at the time having his temporary residence at his house, resolved to accompany him. They set out together in a buggy with a single horse.

On Sunday evening they reached Henry's residence, and staid over night.

On Monday morning, being the first Monday of June, they started on to Springfield, Henry accompanying them on horseback.

They reached town about noon, met Archibald, went with him to his boarding house, and there took up their lodgings for the time they should remain.

After dinner, the three Trailors and Fisher left the boarding house for the avowed purpose of spending the evening together in looking about the town.

At supper, the Trailors had all returned, but Fisher was missing, and some inquiry was made about him.

After supper, the Trailors went out professedly in search of him.

One by one they returned, the last coming in after late tea time, and each stating that he had been unable to discover anything of Fisher.

MYSTERY Continued on Page A-21 Editorial Feature Section

Weird Murder Mystery Moved Abe Lincoln to Write a Story

Abraham Lincoln, like many another eminent man, including the late Franklin D. Roosevelt, was a detective-story fan.

He rated Edgar Allan Poe's murder tales high in his reading.

But few people know that as a young Springfield lawyer Lincoln came up against a mystery so strange, so bizarre, so utterly baffling that it moved him to write a murder story of his own.

The little-known story, "The Traitor Murder Mystery," the account of the Springfield mystery of 1841, appears exactly as Lincoln wrote it in the current issue of Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine. It is reprinted from the pamphlet, "A Strange Affair," edited by Roger W. Barrett of Kenilworth and published in 1933.

Barrett, Chicago attorney for the Office of Price Stabilization and son of the late Oliver R. Barrett, famed collector of Lincolniana, published his historically important booklet after tracing the Lincoln mystery story to the files of the Quincy Whig of April 15, 1846.

* * *

THE WHIG headlined the story "Remarkable Case of Arrest for Murder." In it Lincoln recounted the known facts concerning four men, Archibald, William and Henry Trailor, brothers, and Archibald Fisher, a frugal carpenter friend, who went out for a walk in Springfield on June 2, 1841.

Only the three brothers came back. They reported that Fisher had gone into a thicket and disappeared.

After a brief search, interest in Fisher's mysterious disappearance waned — until it became known that William and Archibald Trailor were passing out some mysterious gold pieces. It was suspected they might have belonged to Fisher.



THE THREE brothers were arrested and charged with Fisher's murder. Lincoln and his law partners, Logan and Baker, took up their defense.

Under prosecution pressure, Henry Trailor broke down and testified that his brothers William and Archibald had murdered Fisher and that he had stood guard while they dumped his body in a mill pond.

As Lincoln tells the story, a Dr. Gilmore brought about the freedom of the Traitors by testifying that Fisher had showed up at his house alive.

Later he produced Fisher "in full life and proper person."

Another account, in the "His-

tory of Sangamon County, Illinois, 1881," states that Fisher was brought to court before the trial ended.

* * *

AT ANY RATE, Lincoln writes near the end of his famous story, "Thus ended this strange affair and while it is readily conceived that a writer of novels could bring a story to a more perfect climax, it may well be doubted whether a stranger affair ever really occurred."

The whole matter remains a mystery to today, although Barrett and others have offered possible solutions, based upon Fisher's known tendency toward mental aberrations.

* * *

LINCOLN HIMSELF offered no solution.

Instead, he was concerned

with "what would, almost certainly have been the fate of William and Archibald, had Fisher not been found alive."

As Ward Lamon writes in his "Life of Lincoln":

"The circumstances impressed him very deeply with the insufficiency and danger of 'circumstantial evidence.'"

An ironic note is added to the whole tale by Barrett, who writes in his closing paragraph:

"In 1845, Logan & Lincoln secured a judgment of \$100 against the administrator of the estate for defending Archibald Trailor in the murder case, but, as with many of the unusual incidents in the case, the judgment still remains unsatisfied."

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